

United States Congress

WASHINGTON, DC

January 18, 2023

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear President Biden and Secretary Mayorkas:

We are requesting an 18-month designation of either Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) for Mauritania, given extraordinary conditions including systemic and ongoing slavery and entrenched ethnic and racial exclusion in the country. The United States must send a clear message that our nation condemns slavery and will not return people to conditions where they may be enslaved or denied citizenship rights through an immediate designation of TPS or DED for Mauritians living in the United States.

Black Mauritians began to flee their country in the late 1980s due to a wave of violent repression and forced expulsions, with a small number heading toward the United States. Currently, there are an estimated 8,000 foreign-born Mauritians residing in the United States. More than 3,000 foreign-born Mauritians live in Ohio, with the largest diaspora settling in Cincinnati and central Ohio¹.

In 2007, Mauritania became the world's last country to criminalize slavery, but the practice remains widespread². Despite recent efforts to combat human trafficking, slavery continues in both rural and urban settings³. In addition, Black Mauritians reportedly face significant discrimination, forced displacement, and exclusion from full citizenship rights⁴.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mauritania-immigration-usa/mauritians-who-sought-refuge-in-u-s-face-deportation-then-jail-idUSKBN1OG1DA>

² <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/mauritania#>

³ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/mauritania/>

⁴ <https://sahelien.com/en/mauritania-a-history-of-land-slavery-and-forced-displacement/>

Beyond enslavement, Afro-Mauritanians or Black Mauritanians forcibly returned to their country face the threat of suffering human rights abuses including arrest, torture, and detention without due process⁵. This is especially true for Mauritanian activists and journalists who speak out against slavery and human rights issues. Although cases of state imprisonment and violent assault of anti-slavery activists and Afro-Mauritanian or Black Mauritanians activists have decreased under President Ghazouani, abuses continue⁶. Some of those who have been imprisoned after being forcibly returned to Mauritania have reportedly been subjected to inhumane conditions including unsanitary cells, lack of water, and torture⁷. Detainees have been waterboarded, forced to eat sand, beaten with electric cables, burned with hot knives, and more⁸. Treatment of this nature extends to those outside of prison as well.

As of 2018, the Mauritanian government was issuing one-time passes for deportees' entry back into the country, called "laissez-passers." These passes leave the individual stateless with no recognition of their citizenship or their right to reside or work in the country. This effectively removes their right to move freely and denies any opportunity to obtain identity documents, increasing their vulnerability to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation⁹.

By protecting lives and granting work authorization, TPS and DED serve key national and regional security interests and further moral and strategic U.S. engagement with the international community. TPS has long served to fill the gaps in the asylum and refugee resettlement systems, but changes still need to occur to rectify the barriers that Black asylum-seekers, including Black Mauritanians, face when attempting to gain the permanent protection of the United States. Compared to other non-Black immigrants, Black migrants are arrested, detained, and deported at higher rates¹⁰. Under the Trump administration, there was an increase in the number of Mauritanians being deported; unfortunately, deportations have continued. We encourage the administration to implement safeguards to combat the disproportionate challenges Black migrants encounter resettling in the United States.

The TPS program also serves domestic interests. TPS and DED holders contribute around \$2.3 billion in federal taxes and \$1.3 billion in state and local taxes as well¹¹. Many TPS and DED holders work in essential industries which upheld the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to contribute to the health and safety of our communities.

⁵ <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/politics/2021/09/13/deported-asylum-seekers-ask-biden-rejoin-families-columbus-ohio/5574366001/>

⁶ <https://ifex.org/mauritania-tightens-noose-on-bloggers/>

⁷ <https://www.clevescene.com/news/ice-is-shipping-ohios-mauritanians-back-to-slaverys-last-stronghold-in-northwest-africa-30632228>

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2013/06/men-women-and-children-tortured-confess-crimes-mauritania/>

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mauritania-immigration-usa/mauritanians-who-sought-refuge-in-u-s-face-deportation-then-jail-idUSKBN1OG1DA>

¹⁰ <https://stateofblackimmigrants.com/assets/sobi-fullreport-jan22.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/know-immigrants-temporary-protected-status/>

The ongoing human rights violations, including slavery and human trafficking, occurring in Mauritania warrant a designation of either TPS or DED. The appropriate designation would send a clear message of condemnation and protect those seeking refuge in the United States. We urge you to consider the circumstances the Mauritanian people are facing and uphold our country's commitment to the defense of human rights by immediately designating TPS or DED for Mauritians living in the United States.

Sincerely,



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Mike Carey
United States Representative